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North Korea: Growth of the Helicopter Force



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North Korea: Growth of the Helicopter Force

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A Research Paper

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This paper was prepared by [redacted] of the
Office of East Asian Analysis. [redacted]

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[redacted]
assisted in its preparation. Comments and queries are
welcome and may be directed to the Chief,
Northeast Asia Division, OEA, [redacted]

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North Korea: Growth of the Helicopter Force

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Summary

*Information available
as of 25 April 1985
was used in this report.*

North Korea's illegal purchase of 86 US-produced Hughes 500 helicopters in 1984 and 1985 is but one of a series of steps taken since 1974 to build a larger and more flexible helicopter force. Imports from Poland and China as well have helped raise the size of the force to over 250 from a mere 25 aircraft, with North Korean interest in acquiring helicopters paralleling broad international trends. Following the successful use of helicopters by the United States in Vietnam, a large number of developing countries began acquiring them for both attack and troop-carrying roles.

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Once able to perform only transport and support functions, the North Korean helicopter fleet is expanding into a force that should be capable of more complex operations. The large number of newly acquired MI-2 and Hughes helicopters are being integrated into the operational force, but

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. The predominance of light helicopters seriously limits the number of troops that can be carried, but helicopters could be used to infiltrate small teams into the South. In this regard, North Korea's Hughes helicopters pose a special threat because they are indistinguishable from the 195 Hughes 500s in the South Korean inventory.

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Domestic production will play a prominent role in further growth of the force. North Korea recently initiated serial production of a version of the Polish MI-2 utility helicopter, which can be fitted with guns, rockets, and antitank guided missiles.

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Although North Korea is committed to expanding its helicopter force, we believe that future growth will be constrained by the need to consolidate and train new units and by growing pains in mastering series production. Even so, we anticipate that North Korea will fit more of its helicopters with antitank guided missiles to improve its edge over South Korea in armor-antiarmor capabilities and train more aggressively to use helicopters in a troop insertion role.

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**North Korea: Growth
of the Helicopter Force**

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Introduction

The acquisition of sizable numbers of Polish MI-2 helicopters and US Hughes 500s since 1980 has significantly altered the North Korean helicopter force. The 25-helicopter force of 1973 expanded in 1974 with the acquisition of MI-4 helicopters from China. In 1976, North Korea used the MI-4s to form its first tactical helicopter regiment, [redacted]

Table 1**The North Korean Helicopter Force ^a**

	MI-8	MI-4	MI-2	Hughes 500	Total
1973	13	12	0	0	25
1974	13	54	0	0	67
1980	13	53	26	0	92
1981	13	53	43	0	109
1983	13	53	61	1	128
1984	13	53	104	45	215
1985	13	53	104	86	256

^a This table does not include the indigenously produced Hyoksin-2 (MI-2) [redacted]

All figures are approximate as of 25 April 1985.

simple transport and support functions. North Korea

We believe that North Korea has a sufficient number of helicopters—Hughes 500s not yet in service and MI-2s [redacted] to form at least two additional regiments. [redacted]

Building the Inventory

North Korea's interest in attack helicopters in the early 1970s reflected broader international trends. Following the United States' extensive use of attack helicopters in Vietnam, a large number of developing countries decided to acquire them. [redacted]

We believe the growth of the North Korean helicopter force from 25 aircraft in 1973 to over 250 today reflects a progression involving three major turning points (see table 1). [redacted]

In 1974 the acquisition of 42 Chinese MI-4s and the formation of a tactical regiment marked an earlier decision to move beyond the use of helicopters for

[redacted] was suddenly able to acquire helicopters from China or because it decided to seek an outside source of supply in anticipation of difficulties in initiating domestic production. Possibly both considerations came into play, for in 1974 the French backed out of a commitment to allow the North Koreans to coproduce the Alouette III helicopter. [redacted]

In 1976, North Korea moved to acquire light, utility helicopters, specifically the Soviet-designed and Polish-built MI-2. Light helicopters have become popular because they are less expensive and more agile than medium- or heavy-lift helicopters. In Poland, MI-2s have been armed with guns, rockets, and antitank guided missiles. North Korea arms its helicopters with similar weapons. [redacted]

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By the early 1980s, North Korea began to diversify and improve its light helicopter inventory through additional purchases, as well as reinitiation of a domestic production program:

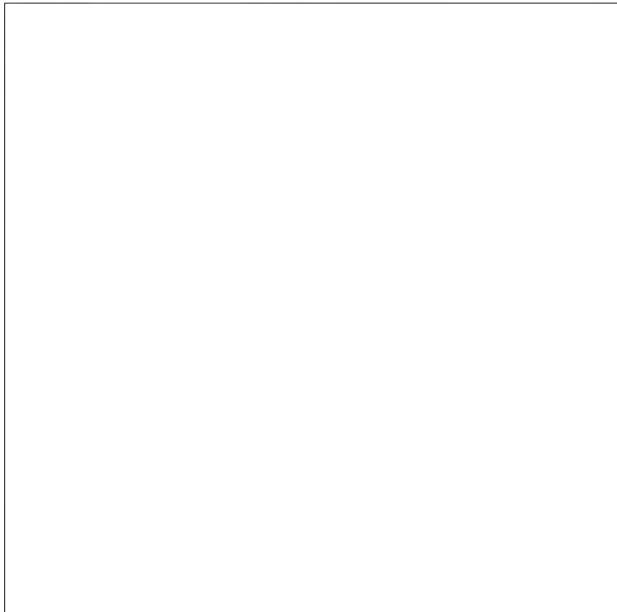
the transaction shipped 86 Hughes model 500 helicopters from the United States.

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further shipments were halted by US Government action in early 1985.

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Expanding Missions

Paralleling the growth and diversification of the North Korean helicopter force has been a progressive use of these aircraft for more complex missions.

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Before the mid-1970s, when it acquired MI-4s from China, North Korea employed helicopters primarily for transport and support functions. When undertaken in a nonhostile environment, this is a relatively simple task.

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The insertion of troops behind enemy lines is more complex, requiring specialized training and the use of weapons. This mission is particularly important to the North Koreans, whose doctrine calls for sowing confusion in the enemy's rear and disrupting supply of

US investigations into the illegal diversion of Hughes helicopters to North Korea show that between March 1983 and November 1984 intermediaries involved in

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Table 2
Helicopter Characteristics

	Range (nm) ^a	Operating Radius (nm)	Troop Capacity	Maximum Speed (knots)	Weapons
MI-2	320	160	7	113	Guns, rockets, ATGMs
MI-4	240	120	12-16	110	Guns, rockets, ATGMs
MI-8	200	110	24	140	Guns, rockets, ATGMs
Hughes 500	260	130	4-6	145	Guns, rockets, ATGMs
Alouette III	270	150	6	110	Guns, rockets, ATGMs

^a With maximum fuel.

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frontline units.

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- With its 50-plus MI-4s, [redacted] could transport up to 800 troops in a one-time lift, either in attacks against airfields or in occupying positions immediately behind South Korean defenses. The much smaller Hughes 500 and MI-2 helicopters combined have a capacity to provide a single lift for an additional 1,200 troops, if all were used in this role.
- With its speed, maneuverability, and small size, the Hughes 500 is especially well suited for use in insertion/infiltration. Because they are visually indistinguishable from South Korea's own 195 Hughes 500s, they are ideal for inserting teams of SOF troops, or small numbers of agents and terrorists into the South. [redacted]

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[REDACTED]

We anticipate that the North Koreans will continue to fit more helicopters with ground attack weapons, probably including ATGMs, and to expand training in an antiarmor role. Over time, all types of helicopters in North Korea could be equipped with antiarmor weapons. The lighter Hughes 500 and the MI-2 can mount weapons only at the expense of transporting troops, but the Hughes is particularly well suited to use as a light antitank platform and serves in this role in Israel and Kenya in addition to South Korea.

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North Korea is experienced in arming helicopters. At [REDACTED] it has been fitting helicopters with small wings, probably for mounting guns, rockets, and ATGMs.

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[REDACTED]

As pilots become more skilled, North Korea may start training its Hughes 500 and MI-2 units in coordinated exercises involving ground forces. Troop insertion training would marginally improve the North's advantage in mobility.

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We believe North Korea has mounted AT-3s on helicopters, but successfully firing the TOW from a helicopter would require a stabilized sight mechanism, which we do not believe North Korea capable of producing at this time. There is no evidence of North Korean employment of helicopters to launch air-to-air missiles, a capability thus far maintained only by the Soviet Union and the United States.

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Prospects

Although North Korea is committed to continued expansion of the helicopter force, [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] we believe the rate of growth will be moderated by the need to consolidate and train its newest units. Moreover, we expect North Korea will continue to experience growing pains in mastering series production of helicopters,

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